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TAGS: EG, IS, PINR

SUBJECT: INTSUM 518 - MARCH 10, 1978

LONDON FOR KINSOLVING
PARIS FOR NICHOLAS MURPHY

OTHER ADDRESSEES FOR CHIEFS OF MISSION

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1. ISRAEL. BEGIN'S VISIT TO THE US ASSUMES GREATER IMPORTANCE AGAINST THE BACKGROUND OF HIS GROWING POLITICAL PROBLEMS AT HOME. HIS GOVERNMENT HAS BEEN INCREASINGLY CRITICIZED ON A WIDE SPECTRUM OF ISSUES BY A REINVIGORATED OPPOSITION AND BY THE PUBLIC BECAUSE OF ITS:

(A) HANDLING OF THE SINAI SETTLEMENTS, WHICH HAS ANGERED THE EGYPTIANS AND FRUSTRATED THE AMERICANS (THE HARM TO THE GOVERNMENT'S CREDIBILITY HAS BEEN PARTICULARLY GREAT WITH REGARD TO THE ALLEGED ARCHEOLOGICAL ACTIVITY AT THE SHILO SETTLEMENT IN THE WEST BANK; AND

(B) POOR LEGISLATIVE RECORD ON SOCIAL AND ECONOMIC PROBLEMS; MOREOVER, PERSONAL AND POLICY DIFFERENCES AMONG THE MINISTERS ARE FURTHER TARNISHING THE GOVERNMENT'S IMAGE AND UNDERCUTTING ITS EFFECTIVENESS.

2. WHILE THIS CRITICISM IS DISTURBING TO THE LIKUD LEADERSHIP, THE COALITION'S TENURE IN OFFICE IS NOT IN DANGER. BASIC INERTIA OF THE ISRAELI POLITICAL SYSTEM AND THE INEPTITUDE OF THE OPPOSITION WORK IN THE GOVERNMENT'S FAVOR. FURTHER, BEGIN PROBABLY CALCULATED THAT A
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SUCCESSFUL VISIT TO WASHINGTON WILL HELP REGAIN THE DOMESTIC SUPPORT HE ENJOYED LAST DECEMBER.

3. IN THIS CONTEXT, BEGIN HOPES TO GAIN OFFICIAL AND PUBLIC US SUPPORT FOR HIS PEACE PLAN AND THEREBY UNDO THE "DAMAGE" CAUSED BY THE SADAT VISIT. HE REMAINS, ACCORDING TO OUR EMBASSY IN TEL AVIV, AS CONVINCED AS EVER OF THE RIGHTNESS OF THE ISRAELI POSITION ON ALL THE PRINCIPAL ELEMENTS OF THE NEGOTIATING PROCESS AND WILL ATTEMPT TO PERSUADE THE ADMINISTRATION AND THE PUBLIC TO SHARE THAT VIEW. ALONG THIS LINE, HAARETZ COMMENTED YESTERDAY THAT THE ISRAELI GOVERNMENT TOOK "A GRAVE VIEW" OF THE DROP IN SYMPATHY IN US PUBLIC OPINION FOR ISRAEL'S POLICY. THE NEWSPAPER EMPHASIZED THAT ONE OF BEGIN'S MAJOR OBJECTIVES WILL BE TO COMBAT THIS TENDENCY AND TO TRY TO IMPRESS ON THE US PUBLIC THAT IT WAS NOT ISRAEL BUT SADAT WHO WAS CAUSING THE STALEMATE.

4. ISRAELI PRESS REPORTS ALSO INDICATE THAT THE PRIME MINISTER IS UNLIKELY TO SHOW NEW FLEXIBILITY ON MAJOR ISSUES. HAARETZ NOTED THAT THE CABINET "DID NOT AUTHORIZE THE DELEGATION TO ACCEPT NEW AMERICAN PROPOSALS..."

MOREOVER, IT SEEMS CLEAR THAT BEGIN WILL PRESS HARD TO BREAK THE LINKAGE BETWEEN THE ISRAELI, SAUDI, AND EGYPTIAN ARMS SALES.

5. EMBASSY TEL AVIV ALSO OBSERVES THAT BEGIN'S BASIC PERSONALITY TRAITS ARE LIKELY TO ADD TO HIS INTRACTABILITY UNDER THE PRESSURE OF NEGOTIATIONS. BEGIN IS ESSENTIALLY A LONELY PERSON WHOSE LONELINESS HAS BEEN SHARPENED BY HIS SENSITIVITY TO THE GROWING CRITICISM OF HIS FORMER SUPPORTERS. HE VIEWS THE WORLD FROM A PAROCHIAL PERSPECTIVE, WHICH IS NARROWED FURTHER BY HIS FIXATION ON THE TRADITIONS OF JEWISH HISTORY, WITH ISRAEL BEING THE CROWNING ACHIEVEMENT OF THAT HISTORY.

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6. BEGIN'S RIGIDITY, HOWEVER, IS LIKELY TO BE TEMPERED BY HIS CONCERN OVER THE POLITICAL CONSEQUENCES IN ISRAEL SHOULD IT APPEAR THAT HE HAS CAUSED THE PEACE PROCESS TO FAIL OR IF US-ISRAELI TIES ARE DAMAGED. OVER THE SHORT TERM, HE MAY BE ABLE TO DEFLECT CRITICISM BY BLAMING THE EGYPTIANS AND THE US, BUT OVER THE LONGER RUN HE UNDOUBTEDLY REALIZES THAT HE AND THE LIKUD WILL BE HELD RESPONSIBLE. (CONFIDENTIAL)

7. LEBANON. TENSIONS IN SOUTHERN LEBANON REMAIN HIGH FOLLOWING LAST WEEK'S FIGHTING IN MARUN AR RAS. ALTHOUGH SPORADIC ARTILLERY AND SMALL ARMS EXCHANGES BETWEEN PALESTINIAN-LEFTIST AND CHRISTIAN FORCES HAVE OCCURRED SINCE THEN, NO OTHER GROUND ADVANCES HAVE BEEN NOTED. AS A RESULT, ISRAEL HAS INCREASED SURVEILLANCE EFFORTS OF THE TYRE AREA. THE TREND OF EVENTS OVER THE PAST WEEK ONCE AGAIN APPEARS TO BE MOVING SOUTHERN LEBANON TOWARD A CRISIS, DESPITE THE FACT THAT NONE OF THE POTENTIAL OPPONENTS IS PLANNING MAJOR OFFENSIVE OPERATIONS. THE VOLATILE SITUATION THERE COULD BE IGNITED WITHOUT WARNING AND AT ANY TIME. AN ESCALATION IN CHRISTIAN-PALESTINIAN FIGHTING, RENEWED CROSS-BORDER TERRORISM, OR DIRECT CONFLICT BETWEEN PALESTINIAN-SAIQA ELEMENTS AND ISRAELI FORCES ARE LIKELY TO OCCUR SHOULD THE SITUATION GET OUT OF HAND.

8. IN THE POLITICAL ARENA, MEANWHILE, PRESIDENT SARKIS IS CURRENTLY OCCUPIED LARGELY WITH:

(A) THE AFTERMATH OF THE FAYYIDIYAH INCIDENTS IN FEBRUARY AND THE EXPECTED ISSUANCE SOON OF THE LEBANESE-SYRIAN COURT'S DECISION ON PUNISHING THOSE INVOLVED;

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(B) NATIONAL CONCILIATION, ON WHICH HE SAID HE HAD PREPARED DRAFT LEGISLATION ON PROPOSED CONSTITUTIONAL CHANGES, INCLUDING EQUAL PARLIAMENTARY REPRESENTATION FOR MUSLIMS AND CHRISTIANS;

(C) THE REORGANIZATION OF THE LEBANESE ARMY.

9. ON THE LAST POINT, THE GOVERNMENT IS REPORTEDLY MAKING IMPORTANT COMMAND CHANGES IN THE ARMY, REMOVING SOME SIXTY-ODD OFFICERS WHO WERE LOYAL TO VARIOUS POLITICAL LEADERS FROM THEIR COMMANDS. THEIR REPLACEMENTS ARE A MIX OF MUSLIM AND CHRISTIAN OFFICERS WHO ARE BELIEVED TO BE LOYAL TO ARMY COMMANDER KHOURY. (SECRET/NOFORN) VANCE

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